

HIS & HERS

Oliver Kennedy Loves a Good Challenge

with equinista, LA Pomeroy

Aren't we lucky that Oliver Kennedy "gave up riding and competing" a while ago!



Photo by Phelips Media Group



Oliver Kennedy with Paul O'Shea
Photo by Alamy Photo

Because at 54, Ollie is one of the most recognized voices and talents in today's hunter/jumper horse show management world. He announces 35-40 top flight shows annually, carries USEF R jumper and FEI Level 3 show jumping judges' cards, chairs the Zone 3 Jumper Committee and the USHJA Zone Jumper Council. He also sits on the Jumper Working Group, and has for over 20 seasons been half a dynamic duo with Billy Glass presenting what is arguably the most highly regarded East Coast hunter show in America: the Capital Challenge. We caught up with the Washington DC native as he was heading home to ESP Farm in Brookville, MD, to send his son off to college before it was back to (what else?) a horse show.

HERS: In 2009, as our industry and nation faced a 'great recession,' you joked about the typographical irony of a 'Capital' vs 'Capitol' Challenge. But that year, the show saw neither a drop in spectators nor exhibitors. Has capital ever presented a challenge or is this show a formula for success?

HIS: We've been lucky. Most startups take years to become profitable. We weren't profitable in our first year but by our second we paid off our debt and started seeing a profit. People seem to like what we have to offer, the quality of horses we attract is outrageous, and I've always believed if you do right by this industry it will do right by you. If there's a 'formula' it's that you're only as good as the people working for you. The vast majority of those working the Challenge have been with us since the start. Our jump crews (which are notorious for turnover) have guys working with us for at least 10 years. We're blessed with over-qualified volunteers. Three East Coast winners of the USHJA Vital Staff Award have worked for us!

HERS: How many work on the Capital Challenge now?

HIS: Not including the sub-contractors, it takes a village to run a two-week show. We've got two on footing, an assistant manager and two crew chiefs, Operations and Special Project managers, about 20 guys on crew and security, plus judges, souvenir stand workers... it's got to be about 80 people overall.

HERS: How did you and Billy (Glass) meet?

HIS: The first time was when I was doing the gate for a grand prix at Cismont Manor and he was training horses. The second time we met, Billy was judging hunters at the Columbia Horse Center and saw me running the show wearing a number of different hats. He offered me a job in Ocala, and then in Vermont. We became friends so when I was doing a benefit grand prix in Maryland I said 'Hey, help me out', and it went from there. I kept watching Upper Marlboro putting up its facility, so we went in as partners on what we thought would be a 'warm-up' to indoors. We soon realized we might have a show that was the real deal all its own and that became Capital Challenge.

HERS: What makes this partnership work?

HIS: He gets them to the gate, and once they're in the ring, they're mine (laughs). What makes us a good team is that we know how to run big shows and do the whole ball of wax while still complementing each other's strengths. Mine is the production side. I hire announcers, show office, scorers, etc. while he hires crew. We make decisions together and 99.9% of the time, we can meet in the middle.

HERS: That's a better scorecard than some marriages.

HIS: I can't say it's always been like that! We've had differing visions. Some worked. Some didn't. But we weren't afraid to try. One year we were a house that looked amazing from the outside while inside we were fighting like cats and dogs. But for a 20+ year show run, that's pretty good.

HERS: And spouses, Jennifer and Rachel? How do they cope with living the show life?

HIS: Jennifer, Billy's wife, does more pre-planning work with me than he does! For us, the Challenge is 51 weeks on, one week off. For my wife, Rachel, she'd like to compete but that's hard when you want to keep the integrity of the show. So she trains and brings clients, and she's great for bouncing ideas off of because she brings an exhibitor's point of view to what we want for the show. Everyone's goal is a show to be proud of.

HERS: Has there ever been a less than perfect moment?

HIS: You mean like, uh-oh, we just broke Jennifer Alfano?

HERS: You what?

HIS: Jennifer Alfano had just won the Pro Finals at Capital Challenge and was starting the victory gallop on her last round horse. The lights went down, the spotlight went up, and her horse put on the brakes and bucked her right over its head. We just froze and thought, 'We just broke Jennifer.' As we're running over she's laughing hysterically about how isn't that just like a horse show? One minute you're on top and next you're on the ground. So we gave the new world champion a leg up and she finished her victory gallop. On a horse, of all things, that had been donated by my wife!



Oliver Kennedy at the Trump Invitational
Photo by Kenny Kraus, Phelps Sports

*It takes a village to run a two-week show.
Everyone's goal is a show to be proud of.*

HERS: So is this what little Oliver wanted to be when he grew up?

HIS: My grandfather would take me to Madison Square Garden, and Washington when it was still at the Armory. By first grade, he started paying for my riding lessons. I'm 6'4" so there came a point when I knew it wasn't going to be expedient to go pro so I became a Communications major at the University of Maryland. Then I announced at a friend's show and before I knew it, I was announcing at two dozen. I do nearly 40 now. I thought I'd cut back by now but I love the shows I do - WEF, Kentucky, Tryon, Chicago, Florida, Spruce Meadows, Toronto, Hampton Classic.

It's a crazy gypsy life for those of us who live it. I spend more time in my RV camper than at home and vacation to me is sitting in the house because I'm never there. I'm lucky and know it. For the Capital Challenge, our goal is to not lose sight of the sport and the horses and why we got into it in the first place.

Oliver Kennedy along with wife and professional trainer, Rachel, each bring more than 25 years experience in the horse business to their ESP Farm, a full service hunter/jumper stable in Brookeville, MD close to Baltimore and Washington. ESP offers lessons, training and showing to private clients both at the farm and on USEF circuits. Learn more at espfarm.com and learn more about the Capital Challenge horse show at www.capitalchallenge.org.

Equinista (fashionista + equestrienne) L.A. Pomeroy is an AHP Equine Media and Syracuse Press Club award-winning journalist committed to bringing readers the horse world's most forward-thinking individuals and trends. Learn more at lapomeroy.com.



Quality

STYLE

comfort

Practical

Supplier of quality products for horse & rider. Visit us online to find a dealer near you!

shop.shiresequestrian.com